

Sketch

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The Power

Stephen Obrecht*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

He studied his house carefully, making sure it was his own, pausing on the public sidewalk, surer of his place as John Q...

The Power

"That was all long ago in some brief lost spring, in a place that is no more. In that hour that frogs begin, and the scent off the mesquite comes strongest."

Nelson Algren—*A Walk on the Wild Side*

"Always there was the power that leaped at you, inviting you."

Norman Mailer—*The Naked and the Dead*

HE STUDIED his house carefully, making sure it was his own, pausing on the public sidewalk, surer of his place as John Q. Public than his status as John P. Martin, the house he would die in, an alien thing not really a thing, not sexless, but unapproachable as a female whose door would open to him but never for him, never his. He straightened his dark suit and grey hair with the same motion and patted his pocket automatically. The keys — Pontiac, club-locker, desk, house, garage, and several others that had not seen their forgotten locks for many years — jingled properly against his leg. An afternoon sun blinked summer shadows in this eyes.

He walked stiffly up to the door remembering for an instant some lost caress of Alabama sunshine. It was locked.

"Damn women, think I'm going to knock."

He used his own key.

No one was in the living room. Helen, half-naked, flitting from bedroom to bedroom, paused briefly within view.

"Hello, Daddy."

"Hello, Sweet, you get some clothes on, eh?"

"We'll be ready in a minute."

The scent of her perfume touched him as he sat where he wouldn't have to watch the parade of women back and forth, his women, hurrying to consult with one another,

borrowing each other's things then arguing over their ownership, back and forth, gradually reaching the state of being fully dressed. Sometimes he enjoyed being spectator to this most sacred of female rites, though not today.

Perfume again, this selected by him, a breath of fern and deep swamp flowers.

"John," she said, "I'm sorry about last night, but really, I get so tired anymore; I'm older than you, you know and age hasn't softened my tongue. How you could think of coming here to our home with Harry, both of you disgustingly drunk, knowing very well your daughters, were entertaining those Boulder boys. . ." Still talking she moved away, sitting to face him, looking strong; he couldn't help feeling a little jealous of her, three years and eleven months older than he, never losing her girlish vitality, somehow finding a strange power in marriage, in womanhood, the girl faded with memories of love, delight in being two, two in love breathing twilight happiness together, this so long ago. It was only recently that he'd begun to see the struggle, only after he'd lost it; not fifteen years ago when he sold the stores that bore his name and moved with his wife and daughters to Denver; a successful pharmacist, who found love, money, and intelligence in one girl, who made good use of the money though constantly reminded where it came from, constantly advised on how to employ it, who was told to retire when forty-four, first told then commanded, and still didn't understand.

"Are you listening, John? I think I'll fly to Alabama, this fall."

"Yes."

"I suppose the girls will be able to manage by themselves if you want to come with me," knowing he couldn't, thinking he might. He had never gone back since he'd given everything up fifteen years ago, waiting for something, which he now knew would never be his again, to send him back.

Helen and Dotty appeared, announcing they were finally ready, and John told them he'd never seen two prettier girls and glancing at his wife added, "except one," and they all left by the front door.

The family went to Estes many weekends during the

summer to a little grey and red cottage. On occasion this summer the cottage also accommodated the girls' special boy-friends and he thought this quite an improvement over the shaggy-old canine bitch and the girl-friend of Helen that had accompanied them in past years. He enjoyed the short drive to Boulder that was the first lap of their journey. It lay over a four-lane *divided* highway and he kept the Pontiac in the *left* lane, forcing its engine to roar to a steady ninety. The Denver traffic had irked him, as it always did anymore, but here on the road he was in command, chuckling at the nervousness he caused his passengers. He thought for an instant that one of the cars on his side of the highway was moving toward him, but the car was so far off, a speck, indefinable in the dusk, the idea so fantastic. . .

"Can't you drive a little slower, Dad, please?"

"Don't bother him; you know how he likes to drive; you don't have to ride with us; you have your own car . . . John, I think that car is coming toward us."

He couldn't think, it was so funny, a dumb bastard heading straight for him, "Turn right!" screamed his wife; he glanced in the rear-view mirror as he braked the Pontiac and saw a car coming up fast behind him; he knew he had to pull into the right lane to let the car behind him see what was happening, his foot frozen to the brake, the speedometer rushing toward zero, two cars rushing at him from opposite directions, "Turn right!" at the last possible instant he turned left onto the divide and heard the two cars meet, both of them behind him now. His wife was still screaming while his daughters were too stunned for hysterics. He stopped the Pontiac on the divide; many cars already parked there, people running from everywhere to the wreckage some shouts of authority rising above the general confusion.

"You all stay here; I'll be right back," he said swinging lightly out of the car, not caring if they heard or understood, not understanding himself. The ground seemed alive under his feet and he walked in a dream of blinding sunlight, pushed his way through the still gathering death-hungry crowd to face the smoking twist of two alien things.

"Anybody hurt?" he asked nobody in particular.

—Stephen Obrecht, *I. Ad.*, Jr.